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ABSTRACT

This study examined the costs and benefits of reaccredidation processes at a public research university. A case study approach was used to examining the costs and benefits of reaccredidation activities by Middle States Association (MSA), American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business-International Association for Management Education (AACSB), and Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) under separate and combined conditions. The costs and benefits of a recent accreditation review (2000) were compared to similar accreditation processes in an earlier decade (1991). Data sources include library archives, meeting observations, institutional records, and interviews with purposefully selected faculty and administrative staff and accreditation site visitors. In 1991, 28 university staff, faculty, and administrators were interviewed; in 2000, 27 people were interviewed. The evidence suggests that the joint process is less costly (more efficient), and that the institutional benefits are greater, especially since the combined accreditation process was linked to the institution's ongoing strategic planning process. (Contains 12 tables and 19 references.) (SLD)

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Comparing the Costs and Benefits of Re-Accreditation Processes

ABSTRACT

This study examines the costs and benefits of reaccreditation processes at a public research university. Middle States, ABET, and AACSB self-studies and site visits are compared under both separate and combined conditions. This evidence suggests not only that the joint process is less costly (more efficient), but also that the institutional benefits are greater, especially since the combined accreditation process was linked to the institution's on-going strategic planning process.

Introduction

This study examines the costs and benefits of reaccreditation processes at a public research University in the United States. National cost commissions, campus leaders, and the accrediting bodies themselves have all cited accreditation compliance as a significant cost in higher education (Chambers, et al. 1983; Cotton, 1993; Hagerty & Stark, 1989; and Harcleroad, 1980). The universities that are planning a self-study increasingly seek alternative but acceptable means to gain reaccreditation. Accrediting bodies have become more accepting of solutions to ease the financial cost and workload strains (Dary & Murphy, 1984; MSA Commission on Higher Education, 1997). Alternative re-accreditation processes may include the use of joint accreditation processes among accrediting agencies as well as the use of existing institutional processes. The main question addresses whether an alternative reaccreditation process that includes a combined accreditation activity (involving one self-study and one team visit for both regional and one or more specialized accrediting agencies) is more efficient and effective compared to separate accreditation processes by the same agencies.

Despite growing concern about the costs and burdens of multiple accreditation processes, institutional leaders hesitate to participate in joint accreditation activities fearing additional costs and burdens from the coordination of collaborative efforts (Kells & Parrish, 1979; 1986; Morgan, 1987; Pigge, 1979). While the research literature on accreditation explores multiple accrediting relationships and interest in cooperative accreditation activities, little research specifically examines the relative costs and benefits of a joint accreditation process in comparison with separate review processes and the use of an institution's own planning initiatives in the accreditation process.

Previous Literature

With well over 50 accrediting agencies in the United States, many institutions with graduate level programs maintain an average of five or more accrediting relationships (Kells & Parrish, 1979; 1986). A self-study for one accreditation process may last 12 to 36 months and cost up to $200,000. Institutions with more than one accrediting relationship shoulder significant time and financial burdens from duplication of effort and overlapping cycles (Florida State Postsecondary Education Planning Commission, 1994; Pigge, 1979).

The majority of the respondents in a study involving regional association members believe that the benefits outweigh the costs of the accreditation process (Lee & Crow, 1998). Academic leaders at research and doctoral-level institutions, however, are less likely to agree that the benefits of the accreditation process outweigh the costs (Lee & Crow, 1998).

Most academic leaders and faculty perceive that the accreditation process stimulates institutional improvement or enhances program quality and identifies important issues to address (Daniels & Johansen, 1987; Coleman, 1994; Lee & Crow, 1998). Institutions report that benefits include internal improvement

from self-study and analysis, on-site and off-site peer review, transferability, credentialing, recognition for grants, and competitive attractiveness for recruiting both students and faculty (Parks, 1982).

Interagency cooperation guidelines were developed as a tool for institutions to seek joint accreditation opportunities. Research from interest and opinion studies indicates that institutional members believe that the use of interagency cooperation will decrease the sense of burden and increase the benefits of the accreditation process (Cotton, 1993; Daniels, 1987; Dary & Murphy, 1984; Leigh, 1979: Romine, 1975; Schermerhorn, Reisch, & Griffith, 1980).

Research Design and Methodology

The study reported here is being conducted at a public institution with multiple accrediting relationships. We use a case study approach to examine the costs and benefits of reaccreditation activities by Middles States Association (MSA), American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business – International Association for Management Education (AACSB), and the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET). We compare the costs and benefits of a recent re-accreditation review to the similar accreditation processes in the earlier decade. Data sources include library archives, meeting observations, institutional records, and interviews with purposefully selected faculty and administrative staff and accreditation site visitors. For the 1991 process, 28 university staff, faculty, and administrators were interviewed while 27 were interviewed for the 2000 effort. Ten external reviewers of the joint site team were interviewed to help understand the benefits of the joint process. Data analysis involves data reduction, data display, conclusions, and verification (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

To determine workload we used Equation 1 below. The first equation was used only to determine the Percent Effort per Academic Contract Year (annual FTE) as seen in Equation 2. For faculty and administrators, a 50-hour week was assumed and used to calculate the percent effort of participants. For staff, a 40-hour workweek was assumed. The contract year for administrators and staff was 52 weeks while the contract year was 36 weeks for faculty. The Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) of each participant was added together to estimate the total annual FTE invested in the self-study process. Person-hours were used to determine time involved in site visit activities due to the limited period of participation (typically 4 days).

Equation 1: Percent Effort per Week during Accreditation Activities

$$\text{Percent Effort per Week} = \frac{(\text{Weeks involved in Activity})(\text{Hours Spent on Activity per Week})}{(\text{Typical Hours in Work Week})}$$

Equation 2: Percent Effort per Academic Contract Year (annual FTE)

$$\begin{matrix}\text{Percent Effort} \\ \text{per Academic} \\ \text{Contract Year}\end{matrix} = \left(\frac{\text{Total Weeks involved in Activity}}{\text{Weeks worked in Contract Year}}\right) * (\text{Percent Effort per Week})$$

Non-Labor costs involved hard cash outlays that the institution or the unit or school expended on an accreditation activity. Hard cash expenditures included stipends to faculty or staff that were in addition to normal salaries, consultant fees, office supplies, postage, catering or meals, printing expenses, agency fees for the accreditation process, travel, advertising, and evaluation team honoraria. Printing expenses, postage, and office supplies were aggregated and considered as preparation costs. Items printed included reports, report drafts, agendas, requests for information, minutes, and memoranda. Printing expenses refer to copying, duplication, printing, and charge-backs for the use of copy machines.

All 1991 and 1993 figures were adjusted for inflation using the Consumer Price Index (CPI) (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2001). The formula for adjusting for inflation is in Equation 3.

Equation 3: Computing Consumer Price Index to Adjust for Inflation

$$\text{Percent Change CPI} = \left(\frac{\text{Current CPI} - \text{Previous CPI}}{\text{Previous CPI}} \right) * 100$$

The case institution. Binghamton University, State University of New York, is a doctoral/research extensive institution. At the time of the 1991 separate self-study processes, 11,900 students were enrolled at the institution. For the 2000 joint effort, the student enrollment consisted of 12,600 students. Seven accreditation relationships existed in 1991 while 8 existed in 2000. The AACSB accreditation process in 1991 was for initial accreditation for the School of Management (SOM). The Watson School of Engineering had been reaccredited many times.

Results and Discussion

Comparison of Workload Resources

Time spent on accreditation activities by faculty, staff and administrators constitutes the workload measure for this study. Accreditation activities include attendance at meetings, gathering data or writing reports to inform the self-study, writing sections of the self-study, editing self-study documents, and reviewing self-study materials to prepare for meetings. Participants were asked to estimate the amount of hours and/or percent of workload and period of time that they and their staff contributed to either self-study and/or site visit activities.

Self-study labor, 1991 to 2000. As indicated in Tables 1 and 2, differences occur in the estimated labor between the 1991 and 2000 self-study processes. The combined number of participants involved in the separate self-study processes was 57.5 percent greater than in the joint effort. The

combined annual FTE for the separate self-study processes took 61.10 percent more time (11.44 annual FTE) than the joint self-study effort (4.45 annual FTE). The regional self-study accounted for the majority of the annual FTE (56.6 percent) and participants (93.7 percent). The review within the School of Management (SOM) contributed the smallest portion (15.6 percent) of the estimated labor (1.79 annual FTE) and only 3.6 percent of the participants (n=8) contributing effort to a self-study process during the 1991 period. In 2000, however, the SOM effort took slightly more labor than the institutional self-study effort (47.9 percent for AACSB self-study versus 44.5 percent for MSA self-study) but involved fewer individuals (8 for AACSB and 83 for MSA).

When considering the self-study processes for the specialized agencies, the SOM actually had an increase in the estimated labor for the joint process when compared to the separate effort even after fewer individuals were identified as having participated in the 2000 joint review (8 in 1991 compared to 5 in 2000). The SOM interview participants appeared less enthusiastic regarding the benefits stemming from the joint venture. This lack of perceived benefits stemming from the SOM joint review may exist since the 2000 process took more time than the 1991 study even though fewer individuals were involved.

The Watson School of Engineering (SOE) self-study process for ABET accreditation had the greatest reduction in estimated labor between the two types of processes. A decrease by 89.3 percent occurred between the separate 1993 self-study and the 2000 joint effort even though the apparent number of participants involved in the effort was the same for the two processes. As one administrator involved with ABET indicated, "If you were not going through a visit year, you were reporting every year. You are writing a self-study or you are talking [about a self-study]." The possibility exists that the self-study process has become so embedded within the School of Engineering's academic planning that the effort has become systematized and more efficient as a result.

Table 1: Participant Involvement for Self-Study Processes, 1991/93 versus 2000

Agency	1991 [a] Separate (Actual # of Participants)	2000 Joint (Actual # of Participants)	Difference	Percent Change
MSA	207	83	-124	(59.9 %)
AACSB	8	5	-3	(37.5 %)
ABET[a]	6	6	0	(0 %)
Total	221	94	-127	(57.5 %)

[a] Note: The last ABET reaccreditation occurred in 1993

Table 2: Labor Estimates for Self-Study Processes by Agency, 1991/93 versus 2000

Agency	1991[a] Separate Estimated Time (Total Annual FTE)	2000 Joint Estimated Time (Total Annual FTE)	Difference	Percent Change, 1991 to 2000
MSA	6.48	1.98	-4.5	(69.4 %)
AACSB	1.79	2.13	.34	19.0 %
ABET[a]	3.17	.34	-2.83	(89.3 %)
Total	11.44	4.45	-6.99	(61.10%)

[a] Note: The last ABET reaccreditation occurred in 1993

Site visit labor estimates, 1991 to 2000. As Table 3 demonstrates, the amount of time participants expended on site visit-related activities for the joint process was less than that for the separate processes (47.1 percent less). The greatest difference in labor occurred for those involved with the ABET (66.7 percent) followed by MSA (51.8 percent) and then AACSB (20.8 percent) joint site visit activities.

Table 3: Labor Estimates for Site Visit Processes by Agency, 1991/93 versus 2000

Agency	1991[a] Separate Person-hours	2000 Joint Person-Hours	Difference	Percent Change, 1991[a] to 2000
MSA	223	107.5	-115.5	(51.8 %)
AACSB	91	72	-19	(20.8 %)
ABET[a]	122	51	-71	(66.7 %)
Total	436	230.5	-205.5	(47.1 %)

[a] Note: The last ABET reaccreditation occurred in 1993

Comparison of labor for combined self-study and site visit. The length of time for the self-study and site visit processes was explored to understand the workload resources employed for both the separate and collaborative self-study and site visit activities. For the MSA self-study process in 1991, all

but one of the task groups met over an academic year (36 weeks). However, in 2000 because they were building on an existing planning process, the committees were provided a six-week window to complete their work. For both the AACSB and ABET separate self-studies, the processes began prior to the 1991 MSA process. AACSB began its first attempt to obtain initial accreditation in 1987 while ABET had been involved in on-going accreditation activities during the 1980s. The on-going self-study pattern continued for the ABET 2000 process.

When comparing the perceived self-study and site visit effort between the separate and joint accreditation processes, the joint effort appeared to require less effort than the separate processes in 1991 (MSA and AACSB) and 1993 (ABET). The estimated annual FTE in Table 2 and person-hours in Table 3 support this conclusion.

Comparison of Financial Resources

The financial resources for this study consisted of non-labor costs related to self-study and site visit activities. Non-labor costs included hard cash outlay for both self-study and site visit processes. The separate and joint self-study costs will be compared first followed by a comparison of the site visit costs. Finally, we present a summary comparison of the self-study and combined site visit costs for the separate and joint activities.

Self-study costs, 1991 versus 2000. When one adds the expenses for all three agencies and compares them, we see differences between the 1991 separate and 2000 joint self-study processes. Between 1989 and 1991, Binghamton University spent over $84,000 (adjusted for inflation) on non-labor costs for both the AACSB and MSA self-study processes. The institution only spent about $60,000 for three agency self-study processes for the joint review in 2000. The combined estimated 1991 costs for MSA and AACSB costs (since the separate 1993 ABET figures were not available) were $31,681 (37.7 percent) less between the 1991 separate and 2000 joint reviews.

The expenses for the 2000 business self-study process increased while those for the joint regional agency decreased. The MSA process costs were reduced by $42,716, enough to offset the $11,000 increase in the AACSB process. The AACSB process may have been more expensive due to the change in criteria and the move within agency standards from requiring more quantitative and prescriptive self-reports to a more mission-based and qualitative document. In addition, the increase in the joint AACSB effort may be attributed to travel and fees from two consultants compared to the one consultant used in 1991. The joint effort appears to have resulted in great savings for the regional self-study process compared to the specialized business review.

As shown in Table 4, differences exist in the sizes of the self-study documents. The size of the final self-study document in 2000 was 55.1 percent greater than in 1991 for MSA. However, the 1991 font size was smaller (10 point font size versus 12 point font size) and formatted in two columns instead of one in 2000. Numerous supplements to the 1991 self-study document were not included as appendices but made available to the external review team during the site visit. For example, a bookcase of over 94 office and department self-studies and task group reports were written to support the 1991 process, but not included in the final Self-Study. Over 500 copies of the 1991 document were distributed to BU's constituents. By contrast in 2000, Binghamton faculty and staff were asked to read or download the

document from the Internet or access it by a compact diskette. The 2000 self-study document is made larger by its inclusion of BU's revised and original strategic planning documents as appendices. The previous strategic plans account for 15 pages in the appendices plus an additional 13 pages for the newest version of the strategic plan. The ABET document was the largest for both the separate and joint self-study processes, and was 150 pages smaller in 2000. Since the 1991 AACSB document was not available, Table 5 contains the change comparison for just the MSA and ABET documents. When just these two documents are considered, we observe a 95 page decrease in document size between the separate process in 1991 and the joint 2000 effort.

The generation of the self-study document comprises a large portion of the preparation costs for all three agencies. One of the goals of this experimental accreditation process was to produce one self-study document to help reduce costs and burden. The self-study reports for the specialized agencies were to serve as appendices for the MSA document. Surprising both the president and the provost, the Business and Engineering schools at BU decided that they needed to publish "stand-alone" self-studies in order to satisfy the site visitors in ABET and AACSB. Both documents, at full-page size, were larger than the MSA study and were unable to be used as appendices. External reviewers still received copies of all three self-studies.

Table 4: Self-study document size by Agency and Type, 1991/93 versus 2000

Agency	1991/1993[a] Separate (Number of Pages)	2000 Joint (Number of Pages)	Difference	Percent Change, 1991a to 2000
MSA	93 pages	148 pages	55	55.1 %
AACSB	n/a	252 pages	n/a	n/a
ABET[a]	546 pages	396 pages	-150	(24.7 %)
Non-AACSB Total	639 pages	544 pages	-95	(14.7 %)

[a] Separate ABET accreditation occurred in 1993
[n/a] Document not available; comparisons unable to be made

Site visit costs, 1991 versus 2000. Differences exist between the costs for 1991 and 2000 site visit activities. The combined site visit costs for 2000 were 15.4 percent less than costs in 1991 ($2,639 excluding 1991 ABET expenses). The joint MSA site visit expenses were 38.3 percent less ($5,600) than those in 1991; enough to offset the 116.7 percent increase ($2,965 after adjusting for inflation) by AACSB site visit expenses. During the 2000 joint accreditation process, the president's office at the institution coordinated meals for all three agencies, potentially reducing the costs to the Schools of Management and Engineering.

Comparison of Combined Self-Study and Site Visit non-Labor Expenses. Table 5 shows the differences in the total amount that the institution spent on the three accreditation processes for both the separate activities that occurred in the early 1990s and the joint effort in 2000. The savings without the ABET data in 1991 are substantial. The non-ABET joint self-study and site visit activities are less by approximately 34 percent, and because the ABET costs are so low in 2000 ($7977); the actual reduction is probably much larger. The reduced costs occur for the joint process even when the AACSB costs are higher during the 2000 self-study and site visit than the 1991 self-study and site visit.

Table 5: Adjusted Costs: Total BU Accreditation Costs, 1991/93 versus 2000

Agency	1991[a] /1993[b, c] Separate	2000 Joint	Difference	Percent Change
MSA	$69,431	$21,111	-$48,320	(69.6%)
AACSB	$31,750	$45,750	$14,000	44.1%
ABET[c]	n/a	$7,977	n/a	n/a
Non-ABET Total	$101,181	$66,861	-$34,320	(33.9%)

[a] CPI = 1.27 (1991 to 2000)
[b] CPI = 1.19 (1993 to 2000)
[c] Note: The last ABET reaccreditation occurred in 1993
[n/a] Costs not available or able to be separated from total

Financial and Workload Resources Compared. When comparing the financial resources to the workload resources of the separate and the joint accreditation activities, costs were greater for the workload than the financial resources for both processes. Participants indicated that the true sense of burden arose from the time contributed to completing the self-study process rather than from finding the financial resources to support self-study needs. As one interviewee stated, "real cost was the amount of time people put into it." So, while the institution, departments, and programs experienced hard cash outlay for both the joint and the separate MSA processes, labor costs were more extensive.

Comparing Benefits

We examined and compared the benefits of the 1991/93 separate and the 2000 collaborative accreditation processes on three groups: the institution, the program or school, and the individual.

Institution. Table 6 synthesizes the results from coded interview summaries regarding benefits to the institution of those two types of accrediting processes. For the separate MSA process in 1991, 10 types of benefits were identified. For the joint process in 2000, 13 types of benefits were identified.

Several differences exist among the benefits for the separate process in 1991 and the joint process in 2000. Individuals believed that the self-study process in 1991 provided both a type of quality assurance and a system of checks and balances for the institutions. The quality assurance resulted in indicators of the institution's strengths and weaknesses. In addition, the self-study process in 1991 led to an enhanced communication process. The large participant involvement and diversity of membership on self-study task groups resulted in cross-divisional discussions of issues; individuals sharing ideas from one division or school to another in a setting that might not otherwise have occurred without the accrediting activities.

The joint effort demonstrated the strength of the institution's resources. The institution proved to their constituents and accreditors that enough resources existed to meet the demands of all three agencies at the same time. As one individual indicated about the joint process: the administration could no longer choose to "play the shell game" by moving resources to one school during their accreditation process and then to another during theirs and so on. Also, the executive leadership believed that the presence of three agencies on campus at the same time reduced the influence one particular agency had on the institution's allocation of resources to a particular unit or school.

Organizational synergy is one benefit attributed to the 2000 interagency cooperative process but not identified for the 1991/93 processes. This sense of synergy resulted from both the institution and individual schools discussing similar issues simultaneously resulting in, as one individual expressed, "everyone being on the same page at the same time." The efforts of individuals at the institutional-level working on a self-evaluation combined with the efforts of individuals working at the school-level on self-evaluation was believed by some to be far greater than if the efforts had all been accomplished on separate occasions. This sense of synergy protected the schools from isolation that may occur from being accountable to specialized agency standards. Other benefits include increased decision-making linked to resource allocation, better alignment of mission, vision, and goals, and an understanding the value (or lack there of) of the joint accreditation process.

While both types of self-study processes yielded specific enhancements as a benefit, the types of enhancements differed by process. For the 1991 separate process, the 10 specific enhancements included support for diversity initiatives for faculty, staff, and student recruitment efforts, establishing a university-wide general education curriculum, developing a systematic strategic planning process, improving teaching effectiveness (especially for graduate teaching assistants), determining an institutional identity, and increasing the institution's endowment. The 1991 self-study document and/or the external evaluator report identified these items as needing improvement. For the 2000 joint activities, the 13 specific enhancements included systematizing the outcomes assessment process across the institution, space allocation and faculty resource issues. The accreditation process for both the separate and joint efforts gained external support for these items thus enhancing their "salability" for implementing the change. Table 7 provides a comparison of the enhanced benefits by process.

Table 6: Benefits for the Institution by Accreditation Process, 1991/93 and 2000

Benefit	1991/93 Separate Processes	2000 Joint Process
MSA reaccreditation	✓	✓
Specific enhancements occurred	✓	✓
Enhanced communication	✓	✓
Focused attention on issues & priorities	✓	✓
"Salability" of goals by external support	✓	✓
Shared understanding of institutional issues	✓	✓
Alignment with mission	✓	✓
Consideration of future joint process	✓	✓
Exhibits strength of institution's resources		✓
Organizational Synergy		✓
Decision-making / consensus building		✓
Academic Excellence	✓	✓
Self-Awareness		✓
System of checks and balances	✓	

Table 7: Comparison of specific enhancements to the institution, 1991/93 versus 2000 MSA self-study processes

Enhancement attributed to MSA self-study	1991/93 Separate Processes	2000 Joint Process
Advocate for Division I standing		✓
Created focused institutional identity	✓	
Developed general education curriculum	✓	✓
Diversity initiative	✓	
Encouraged assessment	✓	✓
Enhanced town/gown relationship		✓
Enhanced institutional & strategic planning	✓	
Funding support for graduate assistants		✓
Gaining funds for research center initiative		✓
Improvement of Instructional Effectiveness	✓	
Increased contracts with investors	✓	
Increased Fundraising efforts	✓	✓
More transparent funding processes for hiring faculty		✓
Established distance learning facility	✓	
Teaching assistant training	✓	✓

Programs or departments (units). Examining the benefits to programs, departments, or units from accrediting activities reveals both similarities and differences. Table 8 summarizes our findings for the two time periods. Of the 14 benefits identified that pertain to programs or departments within the institution, 93 percent (n=13) were linked to the joint effort while 64 percent (n=9) were linked to the separate processes. For the separate reviews, only one benefit occurred that was not evident for the joint effort. The leaders of the schools gaining specialized accreditation pointed out that the external review teams received more individualized attention from the president and provost during the separate reviews than they did during the joint review process. This attention allowed the school to make concerns of the unit more visible to the institutional leadership. Five of the identified benefits associated with the joint process were not associated with the separate processes. These advantages included being reminded of and enhancing the commitment to the unit's goals, creating support among faculty and staff within the unit, gaining the perspective of the external community, informing the hiring process of a dean and helping to recognize an age gap in faculty resources within a department.

The benefit, gaining external community perspective, may be more attributable to leadership philosophy than to the accreditation process. The majority of the joint MSA committees had representation from an external organization. The committees for the separate process had no external representation. While this is a difference in benefit attributed to accreditation between the separate and joint self-study efforts, it may also be attributed to the leadership philosophy at the institution. The provost insisted that the strategic planning process inform the joint review. External representatives are typically involved in strategic planning processes and are not directly involved in self-studies.

One benefit indicated by interviewees may be more a coincidence of timing than directly attributable to the joint effort. A participant believed that the joint effort helped inform the hiring decision of a new dean. The school seeking new academic leadership used the self-study to identify issues that the new dean would need to respond to during his or her tenure. The response to those issues helped the search committee make their decision. The committee may have been able to use any issues generated by a self-study. The uniqueness of the joint effort would not have changed the use of the document to inform this particular decision. However, this is another instance where the use of the strategic planning document as a central component of the self-study may have been attributed as a benefit gained from the joint review.

Table 8: Benefits to Program or Department by Accreditation Process, 1991/93 versus 2000

Benefit	1991/93 Separate Processes	2000 Joint Process
Specialized accreditation recognition	✓	✓
Understand fit of unit with institution	✓	✓
Increased sense of community among faculty	✓	✓
Preparation for specialized accreditation	✓	✓
Shared information	✓	✓
Reminder of & commitment to unit goals		✓
Created support within unit		✓
Allocation of resources to units	✓	✓
Focused unit's future direction	✓	✓
Provided positive recognition for the unit	✓	✓
Gained external community perspective		✓
Made concerns of unit visible to provost	✓	
Helped in hiring new dean		✓
Discovered age gap in faculty as a resource		✓

Faculty and staff as individuals. Table 9 shows that the separate processes had more benefits for individuals than did the joint effort. These additional benefits included getting to know faculty in other areas and professional development. In regards to getting to know faculty in other areas, the committees were larger and thus had more representation of faculty and staff from across the institution for the separate MSA process in 1991. When considering the professional development perspective, the individuals participated for a longer period of time in 1991 separate MSA than in the 2000 effort and had more opportunities to interact with the self-study coordinator and gain feedback on documents. In addition, the individuals conducted self-studies within their own areas.

Table 9: Benefits for Individuals by Accreditation Process, 1991/93 and 2000

Benefit	1991/93 Separate Process (n)	2000 Joint Process (n)
Created or enhanced personal pride in institution	✓	✓
Learned about institution	✓	✓
Got to know external evaluators better	✓	✓
Got to know other faculty in other areas	✓	
Professional development	✓	

Comparing benefits, 1991/93 versus 2000. Comparing the benefits gained from the joint process within the levels of the organization, there appears to be no clear advantage of the 2000 combined process. When considering the difference in benefits among the institution, the unit, and the individual, the institutional benefits of the joint and separate processes appear to balance out. Schools and programs appear to gain more benefits from the joint effort than the other two levels. Individuals had the least number of benefits identified and the least gained from the joint process. This study does not explore the value or weight of each benefit to the institution, unit or individual. The size of the benefit may change for the institution, unit or individual. This question may deserve consideration in a future research project.

We also noted differences among the benefits by type of process and agency. The specialized process appears to yield greater benefits than costs whether linked with the joint self-study or done separately. Within the separate effort, an individual involved with the ABET accreditation indicated that while the regional process was important, the specialized self-study effort was more valuable to the Watson School. Individuals associated with the joint effort are more likely to indicate that the benefits of accreditation outweighed the costs. This opinion is held even more strongly among those individuals who participated in both the separate and joint processes at Binghamton University.

Perceptions of the Joint Effort by External Reviewers

The external evaluators made both positive and negative comments regarding the joint effort as seen in Table 10. Overall, the reviewers are more critical of the joint effort than participants at the institution. Within the 36 comments identified as positive or negative, only 47 percent were positive. As the most frequent (n=7) positive remark made, the reviewers appreciated that the benefits of the joint process were greater in value due to the cooperation among the agencies and institution and due to the shared findings of the evaluators at team meetings.

Many of the negative comments are affiliated with the logistics of the site visit itself and not costs or benefits to the institution: (1) the process needed better coordination, (2) the orientation team meeting was too short, (3) the specialized team size was too small, and (4) teams operated separately. If future enhancements are made accommodating these concerns, additional benefits of the joint effort might be recognized. Taking these statements into consideration, the most frequent negative comment indicated that the focus of the agencies was too different for the joint self-study to be successful. Still, members of the review team validated strengths and weaknesses of the schools and institution when they met in common meetings at least once per day during the visit.

Table 10. Comments of Joint Process by External Reviewers

	Commented on by Evaluator(s)		
	MSA	AACSB	ABET
Positive Comments			
Benefits greater due to cooperative effort	✓	✓	✓
Specialized report helped inform MSA	✓	✓	
Concurrent opinions re. strengths & weaknesses	✓	✓	✓
Valued interaction with other team evaluators	✓	✓	
Negative Comments			
Process needs better coordination	✓	✓	✓
Regional self-study focus different than specialized	✓	✓	✓
Teams operated separately	✓	✓	✓
Longer orientation session needed on first day	✓		
Reduced influence with president and provost		✓	
Site team size too small			✓

Practical Implications & Conclusion

The evidence presented in this case study indicates that the joint process is more efficient and effective than the separate processes of the three agencies. Table 11 shown below provides a summary of the differences of the costs and benefits examined in this study. The evidence suggests that the benefits outweigh the costs at the institutional level for both financial and workload resources. Costs are reduced in 100 percent of the areas studied. The greatest percent change (61.1 percent) occurred within the workload for the self-study process than within any other workload or financial resources examined. This may be due to more than just the collaborative effort. The use of a focused study and the incorporation of the strategic planning process with the self-study process may have attributed to these differences as well. Benefits linked to the joint process increased 67 percent when considering all of the levels. The unit appeared to gain the most benefits (44.4 percent) from the joint effort.

Table 11. Listing of Overall Costs and Benefits

	Percent Change from 1991/93 Separate to 2000 Joint	Positive (+) or Negative (-) Difference
Workload Costs		
Total Annual FTE Self-Study	(61.1 %)	+
Total Person-Hours Site Visit	(47.1 %)	+
Financial Resources		
Total Self-Study Cash Outlay	(28.6 %)	+
Total Site Visit Cash Outlay	(13.6%)	+
Benefits		
Institutional Campus-wide	12.5 %	+
Program/Department Units	44.4 %	+
Individual Faculty/staff	(40.0 %)	-

The planning focus of the institution at the time of the joint effort contributes to the reduced costs and perhaps increased benefits revealed in this study. The leadership at the institution chose to link the self-study to the strategic planning process. Thus the strategic planning process enhanced the efficiency of the self-study because individual units prepared or updated strategic plan documents instead of generating separate self-studies. For the separate 1991 MSA effort, the number of participants and time contributed was magnified by the production of unit self-studies. The 94 reports generated by units and task groups were bound and made available to the visiting team. During the 2000 effort, however, strategic planning documents prepared by the units were not readily available in the team's work area. In addition, the 2000 self-study document was formatted according to the strategic planning initiatives and not the Characteristics of Excellence as defined by MSA. The strategic planning and self-study processes were so closely linked that some individuals involved with both had difficulty separating the activities. Since the planning process would have occurred regardless of the accreditation process, the number of participants in the joint effort may have been reduced by the amount of time individuals took to generate the self-study reports for their units. If one were to add that time to the joint process, the savings may not have been as extensive.

Comparing the joint versus separate accreditation processes, this evidence suggests not only that the joint process is less costly (more efficient), but also that the benefits are greater (more effective). The sense of burden is reduced for the collaborative process, thus preventing a reduction in faculty and staff morale. The collaborative visit appeared more efficient for the institution's central administration and support services. Overall expenditures and labor are less for the 2000 joint effort than the separate processes occurring in the earlier decade. In addition, we identified benefits at both the institutional and unit levels. The benefits associated with the accreditation process gained at the individual level were less for the joint effort.

Several practical implications result from this study:

(1) A joint effort may be more beneficial when seeking reaccreditation using a focused, rather than a comprehensive, regional study process.

(2) Collaborative processes work better for the site visit due to differences in agency standards and criteria, even though many specialized agencies have become more mission driven.

(3) When contemplating a joint process, consider the complexity of the specialized agency standards and their fit with the regional agency standards and focus.

(4) Request a smaller team size for regional accreditation processes, regardless as to whether a joint process is being considered.

(5) Do not expect specialized agencies to share concerns and their report findings at a joint exit interview.

(6) Consider using the institution's planning efforts such as the strategic planning process to inform the self-study process.

(7) When considering a collaborative effort, expect agencies to desire their traditional stand-alone self-study documents. Instead of expending effort to coordinate the documents, look for ways to share resources during the site visit and how the specialized self-study document can inform the institution's self-study effort.

Limitations

Several limitations exist for this study:

(1) The results may be difficult to generalize since the case study is limited to one institution and three accrediting agencies (MSA, AACSB and ABET).

(2) While archival records were searched and schools were asked to provide financial and self-study documents, data was still missing that would have clarified answers regarding specific costs and participant involvement.

(3) Hours indicated for the 2000 effort may have been limited due to the desire of the academic leadership to want the experimental effort to be more efficient.

(4) While we were able to see whether recommendations from the 1991/93 studies were incorporated, not enough time passed for that to happen for the joint 2000 effort. Some benefits from the joint 2000 accreditations may yet be forthcoming, and the researchers may want to follow up.

(5) We relied on participant memory to generate annual FTE and person-hours. However, when possible, we triangulated these numbers with meeting minutes and itineraries to help determine workload. In addition, annual FTE and person-hours were averaged for those on committees and supporting the accreditation efforts even though they may not have been interviewed directly.

(6) Access to the institution's financial accounts was not equally available in 1991/93 and 2000. The provost's office summarized expenses for all three agencies and presented them to the researchers for the 2000 effort, and we believe we captured most of the 1991/93 expenses.

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